

# Beyond the Grave: Shinto and Buddhist Influences in Japanese Horror Films and *Manga*.

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## Introduction

This dissertation aims to critically analyse the Shinto and Buddhist influences in Japanese horror films and *manga* (comics). By examining examples in detailed case studies, my aim is to achieve a deeper understanding into the influence Shinto and Buddhism have had on the formation of Japan's unique cultural concerns. The findings aim to help fill a current gap in the academic field concerning Japanese modern arts and an understanding of their religious influences.



Fig 1. Shinto shrine gates, marking an explicit boundary between the sacred and the profane.



Fig 2. Buddhism in Japan offers notions regarding funerary rites, karmic action, and the afterlife.



Fig 4: Kuniyoshi's depiction of Oiwa, one of Japan's three greatest female spirits who has inspired Nakata's antagonist in *Ringu* (1998), amongst others.



Fig 4: Hokusai's depiction of a ghost. Horror stories and ghostly tales were popular forms of entertainment in the Edo era (1603-1868) and have retained their popularity in Japan well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Method

The research begins with a study into the history of Shinto and Buddhism, noting their significant contributions to the formation of Japanese cultural anxieties. In two detailed case studies I examine Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ringu* and his 2002 release, *Dark Water*. I also examine the religious influences in two works of manga by Junji Ito, *My Dear Ancestors* (1998) and *Gyo* (2002).

## Results

Shinto and Buddhism have significantly shaped Japan's horror genre. Shinto concerns, including the preservation of nature, ritual purity, and taboos such as blood and the dead are dramatised in the films and *manga* examined. So too are Buddhist anxieties, including the treatment of the dead and ancestor reverence. Many works of Japanese horror feature spirits who have been murdered and long for vengeance. On examination, the brutal nature of their death and the treatment of their corpses (often dumped or hidden) are found to be uniquely religious concerns. It is through the study of Shinto and Buddhist influences, as seen explicitly in Japanese horror, that we can achieve a deeper understanding and respect for the complex nature of Japanese culture, religions, and arts. The religious depth of Japan's horror traditions are significantly influential in modern horror cinema and *manga*, and underpin Japan's unique culture as whole - deeply rooted in religious practices which remain as relevant today as they were hundreds of years ago.

## Future Research

Further studies might apply my findings to current and upcoming works of Japanese horror, ensuring that the academic field is not over-saturated with studies of films and *manga* from the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, as is currently popular. Further comparative analysis could be made between the popularity of Japanese horror and Hollywood remakes, the latter of which often receives poor ratings from critics. My findings suggest that it is the understanding of the religious influences in Japanese horror which make the stories so effective, and it could be argued that it is this lack of understanding which results in such dramatic changes in Western remakes of Japanese horror films.

## References

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